Communications/Technology/Progress
a presentation for the Communications Domain Dinner

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OK, let me ask everyone, with a show of hands--how many of you really hate record scratches and tape hiss?

Yeah, me too. Maybe I'm on the wrong side of this debate: CDs are great, though obviously they were introduced with an eye to re-selling us music we already bought.

So, in the largest sense, unless we believe in a Golden Age in the distant past, we have to say, ìwell yes, technological change contributes to progress.î But we also know, as working professonals, that claims made for technological change in communications are most often simply marketing hype or delusional examples of historical amnesia.

So, I have to agree with Joel Mokyr that in the epochal framework, the printing press is an advance in world history. Though I'd be quick to add that photography and offset lithography are equally deserving of pride of place in the technology-of-progress pantheon, especially in the hallmark of 20th century modernity: changing from a printed word to a visual culture.

But I'd also ask everyone in the audience if they remember the wonderful promise put forward in the early 1980s of the ìpaperless officeî as personal computers changed our lives as corporate drones.

What's on your Powerbook? What's in your briefcase? Has it gotten heavier over the years, even if you've been pushing on that Nautilus workout station? A quick check with my Department Assistant and the School of Speech's Manager of Business Operations tells me that the amount of paper consumed per capita at Northwestern has drastically increased, not declined, with a workstation on every desk.

So, my argument centers on the way we define ìprogressî in this debate. As we know, the inherent optimism of North Americans

about change producing progress is a characteristic that inevitably skews our thinking about this matter. But since we were talking about the printing press, let me remind you that the great optimist of communications technology producing progressive change, Marshall McLuhan, made his most substantial intellectual and scholarly argument in his study of printing, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, which examined the change from an oral to a print culture in the West. Where he went off the deep end was precisely in optimistically thinking that the change from a print to a media culture in the second half of the 20th century would mirror the earlier epochal change, and in short order.

Isolating technological change from economic, social, and political relations and institutions always goes wrong. Let's ask a different question: What pushes the need for new technology in our time? Karl Marx answered that question this way:

> Capital by its nature drives beyond every spatial barrier. Thus the creation of the physical conditions of exchange--of the means of communiction and transport--the annihilation of space by time--becomes an extraordinary necessity for it. (Grundrisse, 1857-8)

Technological change, technological progress in communications, is not autonomous; it is not simply due to transforming scientific discovery into engineered invention. And invention into dommodity. And such change itself is not accelerating in the way usually assumed by the ìInformation Revolutionî rhetoric.

In fact, technological change in communictions serves not to drastically change, but to re-imscribe existing social relations, existing power relations. Changes in modern communictions systems have been accomodated by existing social formations. As historian Fernand Braudel argues, there are always brakes and accellerators in technological history. The system tends toward equilibrium. As Brian Winston argues in his book *Media Technology and Society*, the social necessity for innovation and change is balanced by the suppression of new technolgy's radical potential.

Simple example: a few months ago I was walking into the Jewel to do my food shopping; just ahead of me a guy pulled out his cel phone , dialed in, and proceeded around the store. We happened to be sharing the same route through the store, and I quickly realized that

as he kept on talking, that he was checking every purchase with his spouse. He described the five packages of chuck roast and then took the one she directed him to take. New form of communication? New form of control? Surveillance ? Sure. And if hubby can't be expected to stay home and babysit the kids and clean the floors, at lest he can pitch in on the household tasks by shopping. And if he can't be trained to make intelligent shopping decisions, at least he can be wrangled into cooperating. I think this is how most people, most of the time, actually use new communications technologies--slightly modifying but not fundamentally changing social relations.

But why do people *think* that technological change produces a qualitatively new environment? Why is it that McLuhanistic fantasy about the near future, about social transformation emerging from this or that new communications commodity is so common?

It's due to more than people being seduced by advertising or the pundits of WIRED magazine.. There is an experiential event that often takes place with new technology that needs to be understood. People of practical sense and good will actually have experiences with communications technology that they regard as new and different. Especially people who use the technology to create new content. So, even if, in the long view, the newest example of technical development is really an engineering refinement, not a fundamentally different form, to the specialist, the creative person, the artist working with it, it does seem new--especially if it changes the way in which one works, the way in which one produces, the way in which one imagines the horizons of style.

Last night I visited a media artist who showed me his new project. I'm writing a a catalogue essay for an exhibit of new digital art, and the show's curator, Paul Hertz, and I looked at the latest version.   I worked with the project--a CD ROM which could be called a ìcomputer gameî in shorthand. Afterwards the three of us discussed, in a fairly theoretical way, the relation of interactivity to narration. The artist, Jim Ferolo, was clearly impasioned and inspired in the project and saw it as producing a new form of mediated narration. I'd agree, but perhaps I'm merely reproducing my own knowledge and practice. Jim Ferolo is an advanced MFA student in my department, and he took my film theory course. He analyzed his own interests in terms of a concept--îcinema of attractionsî--recently developed in the revisionist analysis of film history and narrative. So

this discussion was at the same time based in a reconsideration of early cinema (sometimes called primitive cinema), and Eisenstein's theory and practice of the 1920s, and the re-consideration of fairground theatre, amusement parks, nickelodeons, and circus in terms of modernity. But it was also grounded in an existential, experiential, phenomenological understanding of the screen display and the puzzle solving game I'd just experienced. My understanding was theoretical and embodied at the same time. Jim Ferolo's project is aimed at refiguring narrative using a new communicative technology. Nothing new under the sun? Been there done that? Or a bold breakthrough to a new form of consciousness, a cyberpunk future of jacking in?

I think you can read it either way. But maybe we're asking the wrong questions. The questions that are on the distant horizon here that must be brought closer to the center are ones like: what is progress? who pays? who benefits? for what end? Are we talking about new narratives for the Disney Corporation, or new narratives for people seeking social justice? It's not just the technology, its the software. And it's the ethical sense and moral reasoning behind that. And the economic, social, and political structures that inform that. At least, that's what I think most of us are teaching.

So, while planning for this debate, I ran into David Abramson, and remarked that I had been down at the University of Chicago's Seminary Coop Bookstore, and while looking for another book needed for research, of course came across one I just *had* to buy to prepare for this event. He said that he prefers Amazon.com. and began to sing its praises, and I responded that he was just trying to convert me to his position in this debate. But of course, browsing in a crowded, dusty, and overheated basement, or pointing and clicking on the Internet, we aren't all that different--we're both professors who love to shop for new books. Technological change, but same old behaviors. And inscribed within commodity consumption.,

But communications technology can also give rise to uncertainty and anxiety. After agreeing to participate in this debate, we were notified to ìdress upî because the administration wanted it videotaped. Suddenly the live performance, the dog and pony show, becoems a recorded object. Am I just sharing in a university community? Talking with my peer professionals? Or is there also an issue of power here? And intellectual property? Are these my ideas? How

will they be used? for what purpose? do I have control of their publication?

Progress--we can't speak it without talking about history, about social relations, about power.